

Dining

New York thrills at Blue Ridge Grill

By Elliott Mackle
DINING CRITIC

Since it opened almost two years ago, Blue Ridge Grill has employed a dizzying succession of chefs. Though the style of food presentation (up-scale farmhouse) and menu concept (contemporary Southern) have remained constant, specialty dishes have come and gone as owners Susan DeRose and Richard Lewis kept the revolving door on the cook's office spinning.

Meanwhile, the service staff at the West Paces Ferry Road wilderness lodge matured and bloomed, with slackers weeded out and professionals promoted and polished. (Any server who can reel off the names and ages of 10 single-malt Scotch whiskeys without drawing a breath earns my respect.) An organic farm was acquired, supplying the kitchen with unusually flavorful produce, notably greens and root vegetables. Signature dishes evolved and were perfected (grilled trout, salads, sourdough bread) or summarily dropped (ersatz spoonbread, yummy sassafras float).

Brad Gates, the latest executive chef, seems likely to keep his head when the pressure rises and the demands for fireworks come. After attending New York's French Culinary Institute, he served as a line cook at Union Square Cafe, one of the nation's very best American restaurants, and was later promoted to sous-chef, managing a kitchen staff of 40. Seeking a Big Apple break, he led the kitchen staff at Jerry's, a SoHo hangout for models and hipsters, before accepting the Atlanta post.


So far, his influence at Blue Ridge appears to be in the details. Side dishes and marinades are in many cases different. The menu continues to evolve. Quail has disappeared altogether and most recipes involving crab — which is very expensive — are gone. Even so, most entree prices are up \$1 to \$3 over last year, with lamb chops up \$4.


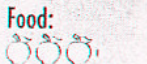
Gates' \$26.95 chops, a quartet large enough to share, are served with brown butter vinaigrette, sweet potato gratin and, as are other entrees, bowls of vegetables for the table. Though costly, the chops are delectable — much more so than the steaks on offer (surprising, considering that Bone's is a corporate cousin) and certainly worth keeping in mind for an anniversary or valentine's treat.

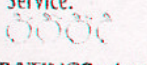
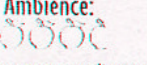
Rotisserie duck, sweet, crisp and mostly moist — the tips of the breast and one side of the leg were dried out — is stylishly squirted with cranberry glaze and presented on a three-grain pilaf with peanuts.

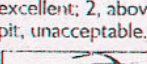
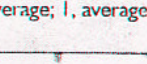
Horseradish-crusted grouper with fennel and the vegetable plate (beets, onions, white rutabagas, cauliflower) are still fine. But a seemingly familiar, double-cut pork chop with

BLUE RIDGE GRILL




Food:  Food: 

Service:  Service: 

Ambience:  Ambience: 

RATINGS: 4 peaches, extraordinary; 3, excellent; 2, above average; 1, average; a pit, unacceptable.



Photos by RICH MAHAN / Staff

Salad days: Top-of-the-line fruits and vegetables make it easier for chef Brad Gates to prepare such tasty concoctions as Pear and Stilton Cheese Salad.

Location: 1261 West Paces Ferry Road N.W. 404-233-5030.

Hours: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sundays-Fridays, 5:30-11 p.m. nightly.

Recommended dishes /price range /cards: All salads, crispy calamari, vegetable plate, rotisserie duck, horseradish-crusted grouper, grilled lamb chops, lemon buttermilk pie, chocolate pecan pie. Starters and salads, \$4-\$8; main courses, \$15-\$28.

All major credit cards.

Kids' menu: No.

Reservations: Yes, and honored.

Wheelchairs: Valet parking; barrier free inside but note that much of the seating involves booths.

No-smoking area: Yes.

ELLIOTT MACKLE'S TIPS: To find a place to eat in and around Atlanta, dial 511 and enter code 3663. Your trial call to 511 is free. Each additional call is 50 cents.



STEPHEN CAMPER / Staff

The DINING reviewer visits all eating establishments at least twice and always unannounced. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution pays for all meals, beverages and gratuities. Free meals for review are not accepted under any circumstances. Ratings are based upon the reviewer's assessments of food, value, service, physical comfort and ambience — in that order.

spicy tomato jam was strangely absent any pork flavor, while a new entry, pan-roasted wild striped bass, seemed designed for a cigar-smoker dinner, its fishiness undisguised by hefty amounts of salt and black pepper.

The winter salad list is studded with stand-outs including arugula with fried oysters, shiitake mushrooms and a bit too much blue cheese; poached pears, Stilton, toasted walnuts and greens; hickory-grilled portobello mushroom with spinach; and the delectable Caesar with smoked ham.

Smoke, very big at Blue Ridge, turns up like parsley. A soup of the night, smoked broccoli with garlic, pleased the entire table. I was outvoted 3-1 on the merits of mussels seared in a broth of garlic, white wine and smoked tomatoes.

A printed dessert menu being unavailable,

the server had to shout descriptions on my last visit, an irritating situation for any customer who does not hear well. Two standby pies, chocolate pecan and lemon buttermilk, are well worth the calories. Pear sorbet, so subtle as to almost disappear, is currently paired with substantial chocolate chip cookies. Iced cheesecake topped with a warm berry compote, the plate striped and decorated like a Christmas tree, reminds me of the worst of winter in New York: slush, gush and gooey, schlock-choked store windows.

Clubby, pricy, supercool, Blue Ridge Grill reflects northside Atlanta to its very bottled-Coke soul. Sure, Brad Gates has sprinkled in a pocketful of Manhattan glitter. But isn't that how we operate here? We take what works elsewhere, give it a turn, plug it in and keep things whizzing along just the same.